A Candle to the Virgin Mary

When Mr. Sulsky Played Angel

By MARTHA S. BENSLEY

AN unusual sound came from beyond the clump of blossoming lilacs in Central Park and Yetta stopped to listen. She was not an imaginative child; the two thousand years that her ancestors had spent in European Ghettas did not quicken her ear to nature, but even to her the sound did not seem like the note of a bird. The blossoms nodded and dipped as the branches were pushed aside and the explanation of the music — a little boy holding a violin, crowded through.

The children stood and studied each other solemnly. The boy saw a plump little girl of the blond Jewish type, dressed in an ill-fitting apron of ungainly length, with a flamboyant purple bow in her tightly braided hair. She was a thoroughly plebeian child, stolid and uncompromising, an enbroyo, Yiddishe-frau, true descendant of a long line of housekeeping ancestresses. The ragged boy looked at her out of sooty eyes between curling black lashes. In his brown skin showed the sun of Italy, and his hair twisted into rings and spirals at the ends. The girl seemed pleased with her inspection, and after a moment's hesitation, she turned resolutely toward a bench at the edge of the path and seated herself with the exaggerated boldness of a shy child. The boy followed and sat down at the other end.

"I heard you play it," said the girl, pointing to the violin.

"Yes—oh, yes—I play—now I play if I wish," and he hugged the violin as though it were alive.

"What is your name?" she queried.

My name—I am Giovanni."

"My name is Yetta Sulsky," she volunteered. "Mine father, Mr. Sulsky, he has a place by Division Street—he makes clothes for the ladies—oh, many clothes—many, many ladies. My mutter she is dead since it was Yom Kippur and mine father he ain't got me no new mutter again. My father, Mr. Sulsky, he is a rich man now; we ain't no more living by Washington Street."

"Where do you live?" inquired Giovanni.

"We live by Madison Avenue, since it was the Purim—oh, by a large swell house, and all the swell people eating by the table; but I ain't having a glad to live by Madison Avenue—I ain't! There was a lot of children by Rivington Street where we was live; we ain't have no swell house by Rivington Street, but there was many children. Only was some swell kids here—Maybe they ain't talk with me—Oh, I ain't throw no glad no more!"

The girl's stolid face crinkled into a sob and her opaque blue eyes filled with tears. Giovanni had not understood more than half of what she said, but his tender little Italian heart was touched, and he edged nearer along the bench.

"I, too," he said. "I too—I am alone—See it is so," and he laid his hand on hers. "So—I am in Italia—Oh, the sky!—The flower! The mountain! All the day I am in the sun. All the day I make the music of my country! But see again!—Comes the winter—there is no sun—there is not to eat—no olive, no chestnut, no polenta! I die!" and the curled lashes closed over the vivid eyes, while the curly head sank back in a pantomime of death. "Comes the padrona. Says, 'See there is Amerika!—all with the white bread, and the good oil, and the onion. It is but to take and eat! Come with me to Amerika!' And I think I see the good white bread of Amerika—I smell the good onion of Amerika—I come!—Do I see the onion, the oil, the white bread? Never—no! I make black the shoe of the man—the shoe of the lady—I give the money to the padrona. And oh there is no blue of the sky, but always black—black—no warm of the sun—no good oil and onion—the padrona permits not that I make the music—Never! And always comes singing in my heart the voice of my country—my Italia! Wait—I play it for you!" And from the violin under his chin he drew softly the air of Santa Lucia.

The girl listened in bewilderment. To her a country was merely a location; not a personality that it should have a voice. She had no country of her own; and in her race patriotism had become but a dream of a walled city; of kings annointed of God; of a temple, and of treasures of gold and treasures of silver. All the force which might have been love of country, concentrated itself in love of family and of race; and while Yetta did not grieve for her native Galicia, or the more remote Jerusalem, or even for Rivington Street as a place; she did long for the Jewish children of the slums.

But to the little Italian the music was a voice of the living fatherland—It spoke of the rocks and hills that had been part of the Italian's soul even since his remote ancestor crossed the Rubicon with Ceasar or shouted the name of Octavius on the field of Phillippi—His race had bred with every conqueror; but though blood had mingled again and again, all the diverse people had become children of the same sky, loyal to the same mountains, voicing their joy in the same laughing music, sons of the same abundant mother and more loving of her than of each other.

"See—see," Giovanni laughed, though the tears were on his lashes. "It is my country—My Italia!"

But Yetta continued to watch him steadily as the strain of Santa Lucia died away.

"Oh, Yetta—see—see—It is with me you shall play—I have no one, too—See, I have left that padrona—I have run and run, till I have found here my blue sky and my flower, and the little hill like my great one in Italia." And the boy's eyes feasted on the summer beauty of Central Park. "And see—there is our tree; I lie beside it in the night and the stars over me as in Italia—and in the day I make the voice of my country," and he caressed the violin. "Then the men and the ladies they give me the money and I eat—See—see—I will show—" And he disappeared in the bushes with his violin. In a moment he returned without the instrument, but with a large, round cooky, a stick of striped candy and four pennies in his hands. "See—Yetta—see—see. I have these all—you shall eat also," and sitting down beside her on the bench, he thrust the cooky into her hands, and bit off a piece of the candy for himself. Yetta's white teeth met slowly in a half-moon through the cake, and she saw that the candy was being held out to her, too; slowly she laid the cooky on the seat between them and reached for the candy, and as soon as her fingers had closed on it, Giovanni snatched up the cake and bit out another half-moon as nearly as possible like the one she had taken and was holding out to her again. She laid down the candy and took the cake, and the boy instantly siezed and cracked off another piece with his teeth. So turn and turn about, the children ate, and then Giovanni caught the girl's hand and led her onto the grass, where they played and chattered happily until the spots of sun faded from the meadow and warned Yetta that she must "go by Madison Avenue to meet mine father, Mr. Slusky."

The next day and the next the children met in the park and played under the trees. Yetta was usually uncomprehending of Giovanni's poetic enthusiasm, but she was fascinated by her very mystification. There were plenty of children in the park but these two were thrown upon each other for companionship, because not one of the trim nurse-maids would allow her charges to play either with the ragged, barefoot Italian boy, or with the little Jewish maiden, who proclaimed her motherless state as well as her recent transplantation from the Ghetta by every button of her ill-fitting shoes, in every ribbon of her manbraided hair and in the heterogenous and incoherent garments with which the affection of Mr. Slusky adorned her small plump person.

One day Giovanni met her with an overflowing burst of enthusiasm.

"Oh, Yetta—it is that we shall always be together—Yetta and Gio always—See, see—I know—I—And I shall have always the sky of blue and make you to hear the voice of my Italia—" And the violin breathed forth Santa Lucia as he talked—"Yes, it is so! See, it was but yesterday when I say—Ah, the dear Virgin, I have not given one candle for her since I have come to Amerika—I have forgot all the time—And now, see, if I give not a candle she will make to go all the sun, and the flower! Yetta will come no more! And I must make black the shoe of the man and the lady—so I go quick and buy me one little candle, and go with it to the top of the hill where is one so large rock—there is not the Holy Mother to see, but I think her eyes shall look all the way from my Italia—So I make the candle to burn and then I ask the blessed Maria that she shall not divide me from my Yetta and will let me make always the music of my country and not to make black the shoes—So, Yetta, it is that I have give a candle to the Holy Virgin, and she shall make it all well for us

Yetta looked at him blankly—what was this talk of candles and virgins that she should regard it more than still air? Her little housewifely heart did not hasten nor her full blue eyes lighten in response.

The next day was Sunday, and Mr. Sulsky kept it in the Christian fashion to the extent of refraining from business, arraying himself in splendid raiment, and walking with Yetta in the park. His silk hat gleamed as brightly as his shoes, he puffed a long, black cigar, and proudly he led by the hand a little daughter resplendent in an amazingly incongruous collection of cheap finery. Suddenly the Santa Lucia came faintly from the distance. Yetta grasped her father's hand more tightly, and he, having no preference in the matter of direction, permitted her to lead him toward the sound. The air grew louder and stopped in a chorus of handclapping as they rounded a turn in the path. Giovanni stood before them, and into the little brown hand that he held out in lieu of a cap, a crowd of pleasure seekers were dropping pennies, and nickles, and even dimes. When the boy saw Yetta, he ran forward, and caught her hand, telling her impulsively of a squirrel he had seen that morning and, then turning quickly, he caught his violin again under his chin and swung once more into Santa Lucia A new set of people were passing by this time and they, too, paused, and the harvest of pennies was again bountiful . Mr. Sulsky watched with a rapidly calculating eye. He did not have the most rudimentary knowledge of music, but he had the delight of his race in the performance of children; and the commercial instiet which had enabled him to exchange Rivington Street for Madison Avenue on the strength of a clothing store in the Ghetto, was mentally translating Giovanni from the gravel path to the vaudeville stage. Yetta had told him of the boy, but the account had not interested him until now that the object of it was actually before his eyes. He chewed his cigar meditatively as the boy came back to Yetta after his performance. He noticed how full the little brown hand was of money, and with sudden decision, asked Giovanni if he would like to come home with them to dinner. On the boy's joyful assent, the three left the park and made their way to the Madison Avenue boarding-house.

While the children amused each other Mr. Sulsky walked up and down, perfecting the details of his scheme; and emitting clouds of smoke and incoherent Yiddish exclamations. The boy stayed with them that night and slept for the first time in his vagrant little life in a real bed with sheets, pillows and coverlets. It could not be said that he exactly slept in the bed but he lay upon it, in all of his few clothes, and tried to sleep. It was so different a bedroom from the ground under the lilac bushes where he was used to lie, that he was restless, and got up again and again to examine different things in the room which the traveling squares of moonlight from the window brought into view. For him it was not a night of rest, but a night of wonder at the common things of life.

On Monday Mr. Slusky visited the studio of the great Herr Klaf. The musician was discouraging at first—he had seen so many of these natural geniuses who had nothing more than a litle facility of the fingers to recommend them—and was not anxious to listen to another. But at last Mr. Sulsky's perseverance won, and Herr Klaf agreed to see Giovanni.

"All right," he said. "Bring him in on Wednesday—I'll see him after lunch. Bring his music along and I'll see is he has anything in him—don't forget the music."

Mr. Sulsky went away in perplexity—Could the boy play from music? Or could he not?

"Giovanni," said he after ninner, "make for us some music by your viddle—hein?

The boy snatched up his violin and swung into his beloved Santa Lucia; then swept on to other airs which had rung in his ears from the streets of Naples till they beat in the very rhythm of his blood.

"Gut—gut," Mr. Sulsky said after each composition: and when the boy stopped he went down to the parlor of the boarding-house and, taking the first piece of music from the top of the piano, brought it up and requested Giovanni to play that. The boy looked at it helplessly and shook his head.

"I can not hear it sing, Senor—these marks in the paper—I can not get it in my ears that I should make it sing again for you. I—I—I am sorry, Senor!"

Mr. Sulsky was discontented. Should the beautiful scheme which he had been elaborating since the day before fail for such a cause? But his commercial ingennity brought him a saving idea.

"'Play the music for me again, already," he commanded, and at the end of the Santa Lucia he stopped Giovanni and inquired the name of what he had played and wrote it down in his note book. After every piece he wrote its name till he had as complete a list as the boy was capable of giving of his repertoire.

That night Mr. Sulsky brought home two bundles—One contained the music of as many of Giovanni's pieces as he could find. The other contained clothes for the boy. In the purchase of these clothes Mr. Sulsky's florid fancy had been curbed only by the limitations in color and cut of the ready-made clothing market. And it took all Giovanni's sumptuous coloring to keep in the background the blue trousers, pink shirt and crimson tie in which he appeared before Herr Klaff.

At that interview Mr. Sulsky exhibited a masterly generalship, and proved himself worthy the proud place he was destined to occupy in the clothing trade. The master arranged the music stand at the proper height for the boy and stationed him before it; then Mr. Sulsky placed upon it the first piece of music in his hand and said to the boy, "Santa Lucia, Giovanni." The master had taken up his own violin to accompany the boy, but as the little fellow swung into the air and the beloved voice of Italia spoke from under his bow the man's instrument dropped and he merely beat time Mr. Sulsky was watching Herr Klaff with the eyes of a cat and they glittered when he saw the musician's pleasure. Quick as Giovanni stopped he was ready with another sheet of music, and placing it before the child, announced its name, and the boy obediently played what the man told him without in the least understanding why the paper with the black spots was put before him. He played on and on whatever the man who had befriended him asked for, and the old bearded master kept time with his bow, and with half-shut eyes drank in the purity of the sound. When the voice of Italia had at last died away the old musician turned his back on the boy and looked out of the window over the roofs of New York for a long moment. Then he pressed a fervid German kiss upon the boy's cheek.

"Yes—yes—I will take him, Mr. Sulsky—he shall study—he shall play—It shall not only be the voice of Italy that speaks through him, but the voice of all the world—Oh, yes—I will take him—Herr Gott—Will I not?"

On the way back to the boarding-house "by Madison Avenue," Mr. Sulsky watched his little protege with a mixture of pleasurable sensations. Foremost among them was the feeling of the speculator who views what is likely to prove a profitable investment; but there was also the Jewish love of children, and the self-congratulation of one who is doing a praiseworthy action.

"Oh, Yetta Mia," laughed the boy to the girl that day, "is it not as I said? It is that I shall never make black the shoe of the man or of the lady once more—but always to be with you—and play—play. It was all that little candle to the Virgin—Her eyes say it clear from Italia, Yetta Mia!"